



A cavalry charge by the dreaded Cossacks in Habarovsk, Siberia

- D. Sir Arthur Nicholson was the British Ambassador to Russia in 1906. Here he describes Nicholas II:

'The gentle but uneducated Emperor . . . is weak on every point except his own autocracy.'

- E. Alexander Kerensky, Russian politician and Prime Minister in 1917, wrote about Nicholas in his memoirs in 1966:

'The daily work of a ruler he found terribly boring. He could not stand listening long or seriously to ministers' reports, or reading them. He liked such ministers as could tell an amusing story and did not weary his attention with too much business.'

Nicholas's German wife, Alexandra, was confident and strong willed. From the start of his reign she encouraged Nicholas to rule as an autocrat and to

ignore new ideas about sharing power with the people.

Nicholas and Alexandra were very happily married, and had five children during the first ten years of their marriage. The first four were girls and the fifth was a boy, Alexis, the heir to the throne. But the happiness of Nicholas and Alexandra was ruined when they found out shortly after he was born that Alexis had a blood disease, haemophilia, which prevented his blood from clotting. There was no cure for haemophilia, and even a small cut could cause Alexis to bleed to death. A slight bump could lead to massive internal swellings and agonising pain.

Both Nicholas and Alexandra were deeply religious. Alexandra had a chapel specially built in the grounds of the royal palace and every day she prayed there for hours, begging for the recovery of her son. In the meantime she ordered her daughters never to talk about Alexis's illness and made everyone else who knew about it swear an oath of secrecy.

THE GOVERNMENT OF RUSSIA

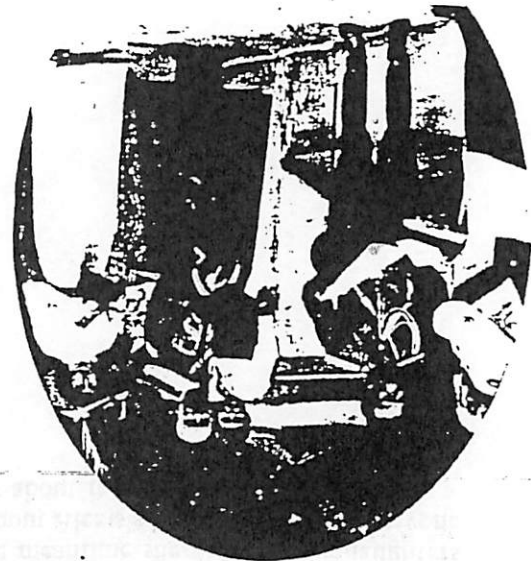
The autocracy

Tsar Nicholas II, the Emperor of Russia, was an autocrat – a monarch who does not have to share power. Nicholas could make new laws, increase taxes, do exactly what he liked, without consulting anyone. There was no parliament to limit his power, and he could sack any minister or adviser who disagreed with him.

In practice Nicholas could not govern 125 million Russians all by himself. To run the affairs of his vast empire the Tsar employed many thousands of civil servants. They were organised like an army into four-

teen ranks. At the top of the 'Table of Ranks' were ministers in charge of government departments. At the bottom were minor officials, such as post office clerks and customs inspectors. The Tsar's civil service collected taxes from the Russian people and made sure that his decisions were carried out. And because they were underpaid for their work, many civil servants made ends meet by taking bribes.

The Tsar did not allow people to question his authority or challenge his power. To make sure that nobody opposed him, Nicholas had a secret police force, the Okhrana, or 'Protective Section'. The Okhrana censored all books and newspapers. Its agents spied on political groups and arrested people who criticised the government. Political prisoners



Tsar Nicholas II (left) and his son Alexis, 1913. Alexis is being carried by a Cossack officer

were tried by special courts without juries, and usually ended up in exile. This means that they, like Lenin (whom you met on page 1) were punished by being sent to live in the cold lands of Siberia. Sometimes, especially when there was famine, the Okhrana could not cope with all the opponents of the Tsar, and riots broke out. Workers in factories went on strike and peasants in the country attacked their landlords or the tax collectors. When this happened it was the Cossacks who came to the Tsar's rescue. Cossacks were fierce mounted soldiers armed with sabres who specialised in breaking up mobs by butchering anyone not able to run away fast enough. In a different way the church in Russia also helped to maintain the authority of the Tsar. The priests of the Russian Orthodox Church taught people to respect the autocracy and to be loyal to the Tsar. The head of the church was a government minister. Bishops took their orders from him and priests took their orders from the bishops. In this way the government had control over the minds and souls of many Russian churchgoers.

Nicholas and Alexandra

So what kind of man was Nicholas II, the 'Tsar and Autocrat of all the Russias', as his official title described him? These extracts should give you some idea of his character:

A. Nicholas had this to say in October 1894, the day after the death of his father, Alexander III: 'What is going to happen to me, to all Russia? I am not ready to be the Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to ministers.'

B. In January 1895 Nicholas said: 'I shall preserve the principle of autocracy just as firmly... as my late unforgettable father preserved it.'

C. Count Witte, Russia's first Prime Minister, was sacked by Nicholas in 1906. This is how it happened:

'We talked for two solid hours. He shook my hand. He wished me all the luck in the world. I went home beside myself with happiness and found a written order for my dismissal lying on my desk.'